

Mapping the Future Trajectory of Bangladesh-India Relations: A Strategic Analysis

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Abstract: *This research paper conducts a comprehensive strategic analysis of the future trajectory of Bangladesh-India relations, offering detailed insights into their evolving dynamics. It begins by exploring the historical context and examines how legacies of the past continue to shape present-day bilateral relations. The study then analyzes key geopolitical factors influencing the relationship, including regional power dynamics and transnational challenges. Adopting a multidimensional perspective, the paper identifies both opportunities and challenges and presents strategic recommendations to strengthen cooperation and mitigate potential areas of conflict. By examining the political landscape, it evaluates governance structures and diplomatic strategies, revealing pathways for deeper diplomatic engagement and effective conflict resolution. The economic dimension is assessed to gauge prospects for trade expansion, investment partnerships, and infrastructure development, highlighting routes for mutual growth and prosperity. On the security front, the paper investigates shared concerns—such as terrorism, border security, and maritime cooperation—and underscores the importance of collaborative efforts to address common threats. Cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts are also examined for their role in fostering mutual understanding and trust, forming a foundation for sustainable relations. Ultimately, the paper aims to provide actionable insights to support the development of a stable and mutually beneficial relationship between Bangladesh and India. By integrating findings across political, economic, security, and cultural domains, it offers guidance for policymakers and stakeholders navigating the complexities of this vital bilateral partnership.*

Keywords: Bangladesh, India, Bangladesh-India Relations, Diplomacy, Track2 Diplomacy, Economic Cooperation, Mapping, Trajectory

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Introduction

The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India has long been of paramount significance in the South Asian region. Situated side by side, the two countries share historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographical ties that have both fostered cooperation and led to occasional tensions. Throughout their intertwined history, Bangladesh and India have navigated complex diplomatic terrains, managing to overcome challenges and capitalize on opportunities for mutual growth and development. As the world witnesses rapid geopolitical shifts and economic transformations, it becomes imperative to undertake a comprehensive strategic analysis of the Bangladesh-India relationship to envision and map its future trajectory. The strategic analysis of Bangladesh-India relations aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the dynamics that shape the bilateral ties between the two neighboring nations. Such an analysis is critical to identify potential areas of cooperation, mutual interests, and challenges, and to develop a roadmap for enhancing diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation. Furthermore, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on regional dynamics, South Asian politics, and the evolving global order.

Methodology

The future course of Bangladesh-India relations is examined from a strategic standpoint in this study using a qualitative secondary research methodology. The main method of gathering data is methodical desk research, which draws from a variety of secondary sources such as credible news sources, government publications, policy papers, academic journals, international organization reports, and think tank analyses. The theoretical underpinning of the research combines realist and liberal perspectives, facilitating a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, strategic interests, and possibilities for collaboration between the two nations.

By utilizing a secondary research approach, this study offers a well-rounded analysis based on existing knowledge, while identifying gaps and areas for future empirical investigation. To contextualize the present state of Bangladesh-India relations, a historical analysis was undertaken, identifying significant milestones such as partition, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and subsequent diplomatic engagements. This analysis also offered insights into historical factors that continue to influence the bilateral relationship. The current dynamics between Bangladesh and India are thoroughly examined, encompassing political, economic, and sociocultural aspects.

Literature Review

A literature review summarizes the writings of respectable scholars and researchers on a given topic. When composing the literature review, we make a conscious effort to convey to the reader the knowledge and insights gained on a certain topic, along with its pros and cons concerning the relationship between Bangladesh and India. The literature review must be produced with a guiding idea that looks at current changes in relationships from different schools of thinking. The Dynamics of India-Bangladesh Relations: A Transitional Era to a Difficult One? By Hossain Delwar was a significant shifts and difficulties in the two nations' bilateral ties throughout the past ten years are examined in this book (Kashem & Islam, 2016). The author examines how both internal and external factors have shaped the relationship and contends that a paradigm shift has occurred in its nature, problems, and dynamics. The current research will generate new knowledge by providing a comprehensive strategic roadmap, enabling policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders to anticipate and navigate the complex future of Bangladesh-India relations. It will contribute to academic literature by bridging the gap between historical analysis and future-oriented strategic planning in South Asian bilateral relations.

Md. Shariful Islam's Fifty Years of Bangladesh-India Relations: Problems, Difficulties, and Opportunities. This book offers a thorough summary of the main concerns, difficulties, and opportunities in bilateral relations during the previous fifty years (Biswas, 2022). The book lays out the future path of action for both countries and examines the importance of civil society, connectivity, and the "China factor" in the relationship. According to the author: "This study explores the main concerns, obstacles, and opportunities in Bangladesh-India relations during the past fifty years, such as border control, water cooperation, and connectivity. Despite this extensive review, there remain gaps in the current research on the future trajectory of Bangladesh-India relations, particularly regarding a detailed strategic analysis of emerging geopolitical challenges and opportunities in a rapidly changing regional context. This study will contribute new knowledge by offering policymakers and scholars a clearer strategic roadmap that anticipates complex future dynamics and provides actionable insights to strengthen cooperation and manage challenges effectively. (Mir Ahmad, 2018).

India–Bangladesh Relations: An Overview by Sreeradha Datta. This book offers a historical and contemporary analysis of the bilateral relations, with a focus on the

political, economic, security, and cultural aspects. The author traces the evolution of the relationship from mutual bonhomie to deep distrust and back to cooperation and discusses the opportunities and challenges for enhancing it. She writes: "India's relations with Bangladesh have been a roller-coaster ride, with periods of mutual bonhomie and deep distrust since the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state in 1971. While the relationship is marked by acute structural asymmetry, shared geography and history combine to make it a crucially important relation for both states" (Kashem, 2016). The current study duly built on their shared ideas to look at neighborhood relations from a realistic approach.

Bangladesh-India Relations: The Geopolitics of Energy Diplomacy by Mohammad Tarikul Islam. This book examines the geopolitics of energy diplomacy between Bangladesh and India, with a focus on the natural gas sector. The author analyzes the political economy of energy cooperation, the role of regional and global actors, and the prospects and challenges for energy security (Majumdar, 2014). He writes: "This book aims to explore how energy diplomacy has been instrumental in shaping Bangladesh-India relations since 1971. It also attempts to identify how energy diplomacy can be used as an effective tool to enhance bilateral cooperation between these two South Asian neighbors" (Kamruzzaman, 2021). The current research fills this gap by providing a holistic strategic analysis of Bangladesh-India relations beyond energy, incorporating multiple sectors and geopolitical factors. It will contribute new knowledge by mapping future trajectories and scenarios, offering a broader, forward-looking perspective on cooperation and challenges in the bilateral relationship.

Bangladesh-India Border Relations: Dilemmas of Trade and Security by Delwar Hossain and Md. Mizanur Rahman. This book explores the complex and contentious issues related to the Bangladesh-India border, such as trade, smuggling, migration, fencing, terrorism, and human rights. The authors argue that border management is crucial for improving bilateral relations and propose policy recommendations for resolving border disputes (Biswas, 2022). They write: "This book attempts to provide an analytical account of various dimensions of Bangladesh-India border relations with special reference to trade and security issues. It also tries to suggest some policy measures for enhancing bilateral cooperation through effective border management. The current research fills this gap by providing a holistic strategic analysis of Bangladesh-India relations beyond energy, incorporating multiple sectors and

geopolitical factors. It will contribute new knowledge by mapping future trajectories and scenarios, offering a broader, forward-looking perspective on cooperation and challenges in the bilateral relationship.

A Historical Overview of India-Bangladesh Relations and Current Situations. In his most recent research paper, Mohammad Salimullah describes how the relationship between Bangladesh and India changes from a historical standpoint to a new global order that is constantly evolving. The historical development of India-Bangladesh relations is examined in this essay, with particular attention paid to significant turning points such as treaties, economic agreements, and border and resource disputes. It examines how India's increasing sway over Bangladesh has influenced its political and economic environment, frequently igniting discussions about external meddling and sovereignty (Salimullah, 2025).

Md. Ershadul Huq's article, *Recent Issues and Problems in Bangladesh-India Relations: A Bangladeshi Perspective*, explores the historical development of India-Bangladesh relations, the various viewpoints on the relationship (economic, etc.), the importance of Bangladesh to India, and the problems that could jeopardize India-Bangladesh ties. This study makes it simple to determine whether or not the recent India-Bangladesh relations are progressing steadily. Additionally, we can identify the persistent problems that lead to mistrust between nations (Huq, Ershadul, 2023).

Bangladesh-India Relations Caught in a Downward Spiral the author explained his views on how and which has made a drastically changes a new shift on the relations after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina Regime, between India and Bangladesh, which have been on a downturn since the on August 5, 2024, seem to be caught now in a downward spiral (Sudha Ramachandran, 2024). Through the literature analysis mentioned above, we were able to assess an existing theory that explains why mistrust works in bilateral relationships instead of mutual trust and interest. It also assisted us in summarizing the past or present status of a research issue. Here, we find a significant research gap remains in understanding how sudden political transitions, such as regime changes, reshape diplomatic behavior and institutional trust between long-standing regional partners. Additionally, there is limited scholarly attention on how mistrust becomes institutionalized in foreign policy decisions following leadership changes in fragile democracies like Bangladesh. This study will generate new knowledge by addressing this gap and providing a contemporary analysis of South Asian geopolitics.

Historical Context of Bangladesh-India Relations

The historical context of Bangladesh-India relations dates back to ancient times when both countries were part of the same cultural and civilizational sphere. The Bengal region, which encompasses most of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, served as a center of trade, commerce, learning, and cultural exchange for centuries, fostering commonalities in language, literature, music, art, and religion (Alden and Brummer, 2019).

The partition of India in 1947 divided Bengal into East Bengal (later East Pakistan) and West Bengal along religious lines, leading to various problems and conflicts, including refugees, border disputes, water sharing, and cultural differences. The discontent culminated in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, where India supported Bangladesh diplomatically and militarily, ultimately resulting in the birth of an independent and sovereign Bangladesh. Since then, Bangladesh-India relations have been characterized by friendship, cooperation, and mutual respect, with the two nations signing various agreements on trade, transit, connectivity, security, energy, culture, education, health, and the environment. Despite progress, challenges remain, such as sharing water resources, border security issues, illegal migration, religious extremism, terrorism, and external influences (Deshingkar, 1991).

The future trajectory of Bangladesh-India relations hinges on addressing these challenges and seizing opportunities for enhancing their partnership. Building trust, respecting sovereignty, engaging in dialogue, and celebrating commonalities while appreciating diversity are essential. The golden jubilee of their diplomatic ties in 2021 presents an occasion to reflect on past achievements and future aspirations, reaffirming their commitment to a shared vision of a better tomorrow (Nazin Lutfu and Ahmed Shanto, 2023).

Current Bilateral Dynamics: Current Stance of Political Relations and Diplomatic Engagements

Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, Bangladesh and India have maintained close and amicable political relations. India was among the first countries to recognize and extend support to Bangladesh during its struggle for independence. Over the years, the two nations have entered into several agreements and treaties covering various areas, including land and maritime boundaries, water sharing, transit and connectivity, security cooperation, trade and investment, energy collaboration, cultural exchange,

and development assistance. Both countries have established numerous mechanisms for regular dialogue and consultation, exemplified by the Joint Consultative Commission (JCC), the Joint Economic Commission (JEC), the Joint Working Group (JWG), the Joint Boundary Working Group (JBWG), the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), as well as engagements at the Home Secretary-level, Foreign Secretary-level, Defense Secretary-level, and Prime Minister-level summit meetings. Frequent high-level visits between the nations, including the recent visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in March 2021 for the golden jubilee celebrations of Bangladesh's independence and the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, signify the significance of their ongoing diplomatic engagements (Kamruzzaman, 2021).

Apprehension over Economic Cooperation and Trade Relations

India and Bangladesh have established a strong economic relationship over the years, with India being the country's biggest commercial partner in South Asia and Bangladesh being its biggest trading partner after China. With India exporting USD 9.21 billion worth of commodities to Bangladesh and Bangladesh exporting USD 1.04 billion worth of goods to India, the two countries' bilateral trade volume reached USD 10.25 billion in 2019–20. Several agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) have been struck by the two nations to further improve trade facilitation, market access, customs cooperation, and standards harmonization. Additionally, they have created institutional frameworks such as the Joint Working Group on Customs (JWC), the Joint Business Council (JBC), the Joint Trade Committee (JTC), and the Joint Working Group on Trade (JWT). Additionally, to strengthen their economic relations, both nations have aggressively supported infrastructure cooperation and connectivity, including the operationalization of interior waterways, railroads, roads, airports, and coastal shipping routes (Kashem & Islam, 2016).

Vulnerability of Security Cooperation and Border Management

India and Bangladesh have stepped up their security cooperation in recent years, especially in the fight against transnational crimes, terrorism, extremism, and radicalization. Mutual legal assistance in criminal cases, extradition, the transfer of sentenced individuals, information sharing, intelligence cooperation, cybersecurity, disaster management, coastal security, defense cooperation, and military training are just a few of the security-related agreements and Memoranda of Understanding that have been signed as a result of their joint efforts. To improve security coordination and

consultation, the two nations have set up mechanisms like the Joint Task Force on Fake Currency Notes (JTFFCN), the Joint Working Group on Security (JWS), the Director General of Border Security Force (BSF)-level talks, the Director General of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB)-level talks, the national security adviser-level talks, the Home Minister-level talks, and the defense minister-level talks. Furthermore, they have effectively settled long-standing border disputes, including the 2014 maritime boundary arbitration settlement and the 2015 implementation of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) (Ahmad Mir, 2018).

Jeopardizing Cultural and People-to-People Contact?

Bangladesh and India cherish a rich and diverse cultural heritage that binds them together in profound ways. Their common history of the language movement, liberation struggle, literary traditions, musical genres, artistic expressions, religious practices, culinary preferences, and sporting passions contributes to their strong cultural ties. The two countries have formalized their cultural cooperation through agreements and MoUs, encompassing cultural exchange programs (CEPS), audiovisual co-production agreements (AVCPAs), joint celebrations of historical events and personalities, preservation of cultural heritage sites and monuments, promotion of tourism and pilgrimage circuits, and the exchange of students and scholars. They have also facilitated people-to-people contacts through various measures, including visa liberalization schemes, bus and train services, direct flights, scholarships, fellowships, awards, festivals, exhibitions, seminars, and conferences (Biswas, 2022).

Key Geopolitical Factors Shaping the Relationship

Regional and Global Context

India and Bangladesh must manage their relationships with several regional and international players in the geopolitically delicate and dynamic region of South Asia. China, Pakistan, the US, Russia, Japan, and the EU are some of the major actors in the area. For Bangladesh and India, the emergence of China as a major economic and military force brings both opportunities and difficulties. They place a high priority on preserving their strategic independence and security interests, even as they look to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other development initiatives. The region is nevertheless tense and unstable due to Pakistan's historical rivalry with both nations, which is made worse by its backing for terrorism and nuclear weapons development. As a major world power and India's strategic ally, the US has also worked

with Bangladesh on several topics, such as trade, democracy, human rights, climate change, and counterterrorism. Furthermore, Bangladesh and India, Russia, Japan, and the European Union are vital economic partners, development backers, and contributors to energy security and regional connectivity (Ao, 2020).

Water-Sharing Issues and River Management

Bangladesh and India share 54 transboundary rivers that flow from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, providing essential resources for agriculture, fisheries, navigation, hydropower, and maintaining ecological balance. However, the management of these rivers has been a contentious issue between the two countries for decades. Their differing interests and perspectives on water allocation, utilization, conservation, and dispute resolution have led to challenges in reaching agreements. The Teesta River stands out as a significant example, serving as a vital irrigation source for both nations but lacking a formal water-sharing agreement despite lengthy negotiations. Other concerns include India's construction of dams and barrages on upstream rivers, which affect the downstream flow and water quality in Bangladesh. Climate change further impacts water availability and variability, emphasizing the need for cooperation on flood control, drought mitigation, sediment management, navigation improvement, and environmental protection (Majumdar, 2014).

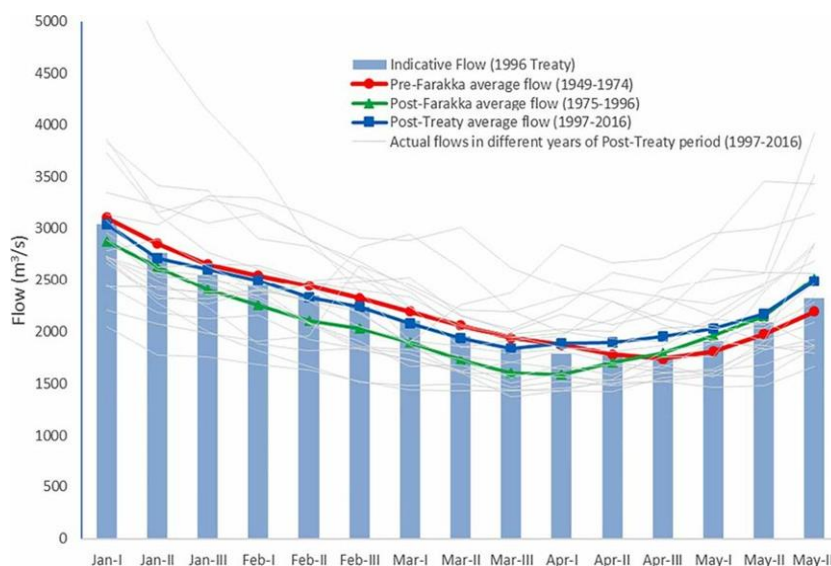


Figure 1: Water-Sharing Issues and River Management: Comparison of the Actual Yearly Flows Released to Bangladesh

Note: Comparison of the average dry season (Jan-May) flows of the Ganges at Farakka during pre-Farakka (1949-1974), post-Farakka (1975-1996), post-Treaty (1997-2016) periods, and the actual yearly flows during the post-Treaty (1997-2016) period. Shaded bars show the indicative flows of the Treaty. From “Fig. 4. Comparison of the actual yearly flows released to Bangladesh during the post-Treaty period (1997-2016) with the indicative release to Bangladesh from Farakka according to the Treaty.” By Rahman, Kazi & Islam, Zahidul & Navera, Umme & Ludwig, Fulco. (2019). A Critical Review of the Ganges Water Sharing Arrangement. Water Policy. 21. 10.2166/wp.. 2019.164.

Cross-Border Migration and Security Concerns

The movement of people across the Bangladesh-India border remains a complex and sensitive issue with implications for demography, economy, security, politics, and identity in both countries. While historical, cultural, linguistic, and familial ties facilitate cross-border migration, factors such as poverty, unemployment, natural disasters, violence, persecution, and human trafficking drive illegal migration. The presence of illegal migrants in India has caused controversies and tensions in both countries' domestic politics and bilateral relations. India has accused Bangladesh of not preventing or repatriating illegal migrants who pose threats to national security and social harmony. Bangladesh, in turn, denies that its citizens migrate illegally to India for economic reasons or that it has any obligation to accept them back. To address this issue, India has taken measures such as border fencing, biometric identification, citizenship verification, and legal amendments to identify and deport illegal migrants.



Source: Wikipedia; Bangladesh-India Border (Map)

Infrastructure Development and Connectivity Projects

Bangladesh and India have undertaken several infrastructure development projects to promote trade, transit, tourism, energy cooperation, people-to-people interactions, and regional integration because they understand how important it is to improve physical connectivity. Road, rail, water, air, power, optical fiber, and multimodal corridors that directly connect the two nations or include cooperation with third parties like Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives are examples of these projects. "Some initiatives, such as the Akhaura-Agartala rail link, the Maitree Super Thermal Power Project, and the Rampal Power Plant, have been initiated at the bilateral level." Subregional projects operate under frameworks like the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) and the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC). Furthermore, regional and global endeavors include the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Asian Highway Network (AHN) (Majumdar, 2014).

Table 1: Status of India's connectivity projects with Bangladesh

Sector	Project	Year of Completion	Status
Energy	SASEC 1000MW-HVDC Bangladesh India Electrical Grid Interconnection Project I	2016	Completed
Energy	Restoration of the Radhikapur-Birol rail link	2017	Completed
Energy	SASEC 500MW-HVDC Bangladesh India Electrical Grid Interconnection Project II	2017	Completed
Transport	Restoration of the Haldibari–Chilahati rail link	2020	Completed
Transport	Restoration of the Gede-Darshana rail link	2021	Completed
Transport	Restoration of the Petrapole-Benapole rail link	2022	Completed
Transport	Akhaura-Agartala rail link I	2023*	Completed
Transport	Khulna-Mongla Port Rail	2023	Completed
Energy	Maitree Thermal Power Plant I, II	2023*	Completed
Energy	India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline	2023	Completed
Energy	Rooppur Nuclear Plant I	2024	Completed
Energy	Katihar-Parbatipur-Bornagar 765 kV electricity transmission line	2025	Under Construction
Digital	ISRO-Bangladesh satellite launch	N/A	MoU Signed
Digital	4G/5G connectivity projects by Indian companies	N/A	MoU Signed
Total number of sectors covered: 3	Total Projects: 16		

Source: MEA Dashboard, Ministry of External Affairs, India, (**only parts/phases of these projects have been completed*).

In the above table, we see that three types of projects have been covered by the Indian side for Bangladesh. The total number of projects is 16. These three sectors are covered during the tenure of the former Government of Bangladesh with India. Three projects

have not yet been completed, one is under construction it will be completed approximately in 2025, and the rest of the two are only MoUs signed between Bangladesh and the Indian government. There have been three sectoral connectivity is going on between Bangladesh and India last couple of decades. These are Physical, Energy, and Digital connectivity so on. maximum physical and Energy projects have been completed. India's role in economic development and regional growth has partly (yet significantly) been cultivated by extensive connectivity projects across the region. While national parties in other countries may instrumentalize anti-India rhetoric to gain power, they still recognize the importance of New Delhi's various economic and physical linkages in regional development. This is particularly true for Bangladesh, a country that wishes for a developing country status in the UN by 2026 and needs multiple development partnerships to achieve the same (ORF,2024).

Joint Infrastructure Projects and Connectivity Initiatives

Bangladesh and India have undertaken some infrastructure development projects to promote trade, transit, tourism, energy cooperation, people-to-people interactions, and regional integration because they understand how important it is to improve physical connectivity.

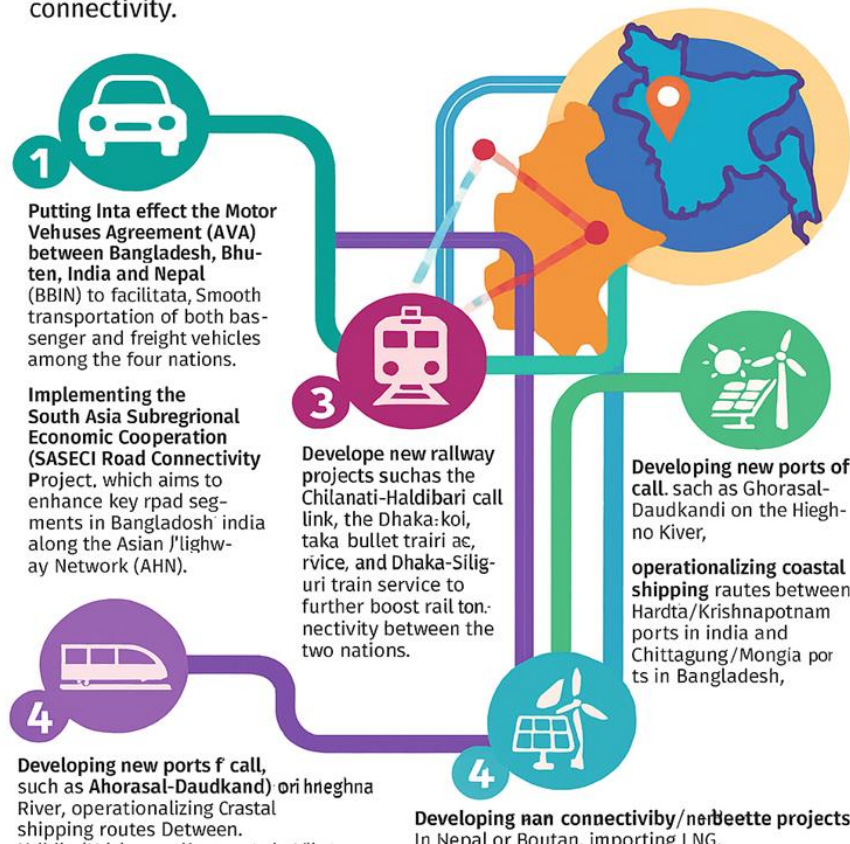


Figure 2: Joint Infrastructure Projects and Connectivity Initiatives

Source: Authors (2025)

Opportunities for Strengthening Cooperation

Trade and Investment Potential: India and Bangladesh have a strong economic relationship; India is Bangladesh's top commercial partner in South Asia, and Bangladesh is India's second-largest trading partner in the area, behind China. The COVID-19 pandemic presented difficulties, but bilateral trade reached US\$10.78 billion in 2020–21. However, because of their complementary capabilities and

comparative advantages across some sectors, there is still a great deal of unrealized potential for further boosting trade and investment between the two nations. There are numerous chances to boost investment and commerce, including:

Bangladeshi exports to India should have easier access to markets and fewer tariffs and non-tariff barriers, especially in industries like ready-made clothing, jute and jute products, leather goods, plastic goods, fish, soft drinks, copper, and edible oil. "Efforts should focus on boosting value addition and export diversification for both nations, with an emphasis on industries such as services, information technology, agro-processing, electronics, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy." Encouraging partnerships and joint ventures between Bangladeshi and Indian businesses, particularly in sectors such as power, energy, transportation, tourism, healthcare, education, and skill development, utilizing already-existing bilateral mechanisms to address trade-related issues and promote business-to-business interactions, such as the Joint Economic Commission (JEC), Joint Business Council (JBC), Joint Trade Committee (JTC), Joint Working Group on Trade (JWT), and Joint Working Group on Customs (JWC). investigating the potential signature of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to address investment, economic cooperation, trade in commodities and services, and technical support (Kamruzzaman, 2021). Enhancing export diversification and value addition for both countries by focusing on sectors such as pharmaceuticals, textiles, electronics, automobiles, agro-processing, renewable energy, information technology, and services. Promoting joint ventures and collaborations between Indian and Bangladeshi companies, particularly in areas such as infrastructure, power, energy, transport, tourism, healthcare, education, and skill development. Utilizing existing bilateral mechanisms—such as the Joint Economic Commission (JEC), Joint Business Council (JBC), Joint Trade Committee (JTC), Joint Working Group on Trade (JWT), and Joint Working Group on Customs (JWC)—to address trade-related issues and promote business-to-business interactions. Additionally, exploring the potential signing of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to enhance cooperation in investment, economic collaboration, trade in goods and services, and technical assistance (Kamruzzaman, 2021).

Joint Infrastructure Projects and Connectivity Initiatives: Bangladesh and India have undertaken some infrastructure development projects to promote trade, transit,

tourism, energy cooperation, people-to-people interactions, and regional integration because they understand how important it is to improve physical connectivity.

The following are some chances to improve collaboration in this field:

1. Putting into effect the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) to facilitate the smooth transportation of both passenger and freight vehicles among the four nations. Implementing the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Road Connectivity Project, which aims to enhance key road segments in Bangladesh and India along the Asian Highway Network (AHN).
2. Promoting ongoing railway projects to improve cross-border rail connectivity between Bangladesh and India, such as the Khulna-Mongla rail link, the Kulaura-Shahbazzpur rail link, and the Akhaura-Agartala rail link.
3. Developing new railway projects such as the Chilahati-Haldibari rail link, the Dhaka-Kolkata bullet train service, and the Dhaka-Siliguri train service to further boost rail connectivity between the two nations.
4. Developing new ports of call, such as Ghorasal-Daudkandi on the Meghna River; operationalizing coastal shipping routes between Haldia/Krishnapatnam ports in India and Chittagong/Mongla ports in Bangladesh; and dredging important waterways, such as the Ashuganj-Zakiganj stretch of the Kushiya River and the Sirajganj-Daikhawa stretch of the Jamuna River, to improve the connectivity of inland water transport (IWT). Enhancing air connectivity by increasing flight frequencies, adding new destinations, reducing airfares, simplifying visa procedures, and establishing direct cargo flights between Bangladesh and India.
5. Developing cooperative hydroelectric projects in Nepal or Bhutan, importing LNG from India via pipelines or trucks, importing electricity from India through the existing interconnections at Bheramara-Baharampur, and investigating renewable energy sources like solar and wind power are all ways to strengthen power and energy cooperation.

Collaboration in Tackling Climate Change and Environmental Challenges: Both Bangladesh and India face common environmental challenges and are vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, floods, droughts, salinity intrusion, and cyclones. Opportunities for collaboration in this area include:

1. Sharing data and information on climate change scenarios, impacts, vulnerabilities, adaptation, mitigation, finance, technology, and best practices.
2. Developing joint action plans and strategies to address climate change risks and opportunities in sectors like agriculture, water, health, energy, transport, urban development, and disaster management.
3. Implementing joint projects and programs to enhance climate resilience and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in areas such as coastal zone management, river basin management, flood control, drought mitigation, renewable energy, energy efficiency, afforestation, and conservation.
4. Strengthening institutional platforms and mechanisms for climate change cooperation, including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Joint River Commission (JRC), and the Joint Working Group on Environment and Climate Change (JWG-ECC).
5. Taking part in regional and international climate change forums and initiatives, including the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), the International Solar Alliance (ISA), the Global Climate Action Summit (GCAS), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Cultural and Educational Exchanges: Bangladesh and India share a rich and diverse cultural heritage that binds them together in many ways. Opportunities for enhancing cultural and educational exchanges include:

- a) Promoting cultural cooperation through various agreements and MoUs on cultural exchange programs (CEPs), audio-visual co-production agreements (AVCPAs), joint celebrations of historical events and personalities, preservation of cultural heritage sites and monuments, and promotion of tourism and pilgrimage circuits.
- b) Facilitating people-to-people contacts through measures such as visa liberalization schemes, bus and train services, direct flights, scholarships, fellowships, awards, festivals, exhibitions, seminars, and conferences.

- c) Encouraging academic collaboration and exchange between educational institutions, such as universities, colleges, schools, and research institutes, in areas such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), humanities, social sciences, and arts.
- d) Supporting skill development and vocational training programs for youth and professionals in sectors like information technology, health care, hospitality, and tourism.
- e) Fostering media cooperation and exchange between journalists, editors, publishers, and media platforms in print, electronic, and digital media.

Challenges and Potential Areas of Contention

Water-sharing Disputes and Transboundary River Management: Bangladesh and India share 54 transboundary rivers flowing from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, providing vital resources for agriculture, fisheries, navigation, hydropower, and ecology. However, managing these rivers has been a longstanding contentious issue due to differing interests and perspectives on water allocation, utilization, conservation, and dispute resolution. The Teesta River is a prominent example, serving as a major source of irrigation for both countries, yet it still lacks a formal water-sharing agreement despite prolonged negotiations. Other concerns include India's construction of dams and barrages on upstream rivers affecting downstream water flow and quality in Bangladesh, climate change impacts on water availability and variability, and the need for cooperation on flood control, drought mitigation, sediment management, navigation improvement, and environmental protection (Alden and Brummer, 2019).

Security Challenges Along the Border: Cross-border movement between Bangladesh and India has complex implications for both countries' demography, economy, security, politics, and identity. While historical, cultural, linguistic, and familial ties facilitate migration, factors like poverty, unemployment, natural disasters, violence, persecution, and human trafficking drive illegal migration. The presence of illegal migrants in India has led to tensions in domestic politics and bilateral relations. India accuses Bangladesh of not preventing or accepting back illegal migrants, posing security threats. Bangladesh denies that its citizens migrate illegally and has taken measures to address these concerns, including border fencing, biometric identification, citizenship verification, and legal amendments.

Economic Imbalances and Trade Barriers: Bangladesh and India have a strong economic partnership, with India being Bangladesh's largest trading partner in South Asia and vice versa, after China. The bilateral trade volume reached US\$10.78 billion in 2020-21. However, trade imbalances persist, with India enjoying a significant trade surplus over Bangladesh. Bangladesh raises concerns over India's high tariffs and non-tariff barriers, particularly in sectors like readymade garments, jute products, leather goods, plastics, fish, soft drinks, copper, and edible oil. Bangladesh seeks greater market access and preferential treatment from India under regional and sub-regional frameworks, including SAFTA, BIMSTEC, and the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (Kashem, 2016).

Political and Historical Sensitivities: Bangladesh and India share a history of the liberation struggle in 1971, with India supporting Bangladesh's independence militarily and diplomatically, and being among the first to recognize it as a sovereign state⁷. However, certain political and historical sensitivities influence bilateral relations. These include unresolved issues like civilian killings by Indian border security forces, allegations of Indian intelligence agencies' interference in Bangladeshi politics, concerns about India's perceived hegemony in South Asia, the strategic competition and partnership dynamics with China, and the rise of religious extremism and communal violence in both countries.

Analyzing the Impact of External Actors: China's Role and Influence in the Region

China holds significant economic and strategic importance for both Bangladesh and India, while also presenting potential competition and rivalry. Bangladesh has received substantial Chinese investments in its infrastructure, energy, and trade sectors as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is also the largest supplier of military equipment and training to Bangladesh. Despite China's support for Bangladesh on the Rohingya crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, its expanding presence and influence in the country may raise concerns for India. India views Bangladesh as a key partner in its "Neighborhood First" policy and its vision of a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific." Thus, India closely monitors China's activities and intentions in the region, particularly regarding border disputes, maritime security, and regional connectivity. To counterbalance China's influence, India seeks to strengthen cooperation with Bangladesh across various sectors, such as trade, transit, energy, security, and cultural exchanges.

Involvement of Other Neighboring Countries

Bangladesh and India share borders with neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Pakistan, whose actions and policies also impact their bilateral relations. Nepal and Bhutan, being landlocked nations, rely on Bangladesh and India for transit and trade access. They are part of subregional cooperation frameworks, such as the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN), Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), and the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC). Myanmar plays a crucial role in Bangladesh's connectivity with Southeast Asia and is essential for addressing the Rohingya crisis. On the other hand, Pakistan, a historical rival of both Bangladesh and India, has been involved in past conflicts and wars with them. Pakistan's support for terrorism and extremism poses security threats to both Bangladesh and India.

Mediation Efforts by International Organizations

Bangladesh and India participate in various international organizations that offer platforms for dialogue, cooperation, and mediation on bilateral issues. These organizations include the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the BRICS. These platforms have played diverse roles in facilitating cooperation or resolving disputes between Bangladesh and India on matters such as trade, development, climate change, human rights, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, maritime security, and more.

Future Scenarios for Bangladesh-India Relations

Optimistic Scenario

Strengthened Cooperation and Strategic Partnership. In this optimistic scenario, Bangladesh and India successfully overcome their differences and challenges, fostering enhanced cooperation and partnership across various sectors, including trade, transit, energy, security, culture, and regional integration. By resolving outstanding disputes, such as the Teesta water-sharing agreement, addressing issues related to the killing of Bangladeshi nationals by Indian border security forces, illegal migration, and citizenship concerns, and addressing China's role in the region, both nations create a conducive environment for mutual growth. Leveraging their complementary strengths and comparative advantages, they strive to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

Together, they develop a shared vision and strategy for a peaceful, prosperous, and stable South Asia, effectively addressing common threats and opportunities such as terrorism, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and digital transformation. Emphasizing people-to-people ties, they celebrate their shared heritage and embrace diversity, solidifying their bond further.

Pessimistic Scenario

Escalating Tensions and Unresolved Disputes: In this pessimistic scenario, Bangladesh and India fail to address their differences and challenges, leading to rising tensions and conflicts across various domains, including trade, transit, energy, security, culture, and regional integration. Persistent unresolved disputes, such as the Teesta water-sharing agreement, issues with Indian border security forces, illegal migration, citizenship matters, and concerns about China's influence in the region, strain their relationship further. As they compete for influence and resources, adopting protectionist and nationalist policies, both countries' interests suffer. The adversarial relationship they develop undermines peace, prosperity, and stability in South Asia, resulting in weakened people-to-people ties and heightened divisions.

Realistic Scenario

Pragmatic Engagement and Managed Challenges: In this realistic scenario, Bangladesh and India maintain a balanced and pragmatic relationship, grounded in mutual interests and respect. They engage in cooperative efforts in areas of converging interests, such as trade, transit, energy, security, culture, and regional integration. While they acknowledge and manage differences on certain issues, like the Teesta water-sharing agreement, concerns with border security forces, illegal migration, citizenship matters, and China's regional role, they also seek common ground and compromise whenever possible. Upholding each other's sovereignty and interests, they nurture a cordial and constructive relationship that contributes positively to their development and progress in South Asia. Emphasizing the importance of people-to-people ties, they appreciate their shared heritage and celebrate their diverse backgrounds.

Policy Recommendations

In the quest to shape a more cooperative and mutually beneficial future, several policy recommendations can guide the route of Bangladesh-India relations.

Firstly, enhancing economic cooperation stands as a cornerstone for fostering stronger ties between the two nations. This entails streamlining trade procedures, reducing tariffs, and eliminating non-tariff barriers to facilitate smoother cross-border trade. Moreover, establishing bilateral mechanisms to promote investments across various sectors such as manufacturing, infrastructure, and technology can unlock new avenues for growth and collaboration. Special economic zones along border areas could serve as catalysts for economic development, attracting investments and promoting trade, thereby boosting regional prosperity.

Secondly, the longstanding issue of water sharing demands urgent attention. Both countries must initiate a structured and continuous bilateral dialogue framework to address water sharing disputes effectively. Emphasis should be placed on achieving equitable distribution of water resources from shared rivers. Exploring the establishment of joint river basin management authorities can provide a sustainable mechanism for managing shared water resources, involving relevant stakeholders from both nations to ensure transparency and accountability.

Thirdly, fostering people-to-people contacts is crucial for nurturing mutual understanding and trust between Bangladesh and India. Initiatives to facilitate easier travel, educational exchanges, and cultural interactions should be prioritized. This could involve simplifying visa procedures, expanding scholarship programs, and promoting cultural events and festivals. Strengthening academic collaborations and research partnerships between universities and research institutions can also contribute to deepening ties between the people of both nations.

Fourthly, security cooperation plays a vital role in addressing common challenges and ensuring stability in the region. Both countries should deepen collaboration on counterterrorism efforts, including intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and capacity-building initiatives. Enhancing border management and security cooperation can effectively address issues such as smuggling, human trafficking, and illegal migration. Exploring the possibility of joint patrols and coordinated responses to maritime security threats can further strengthen security cooperation between Bangladesh and India.

Fifthly, investing in regional connectivity is essential for promoting economic integration and facilitating trade and commerce. Both countries should prioritize the development of infrastructure projects that enhance connectivity, including road, rail, and port facilities. Supporting regional initiatives such as the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) frameworks can unlock the full potential of regional connectivity. Private sector participation and investment in cross-border infrastructure projects should be encouraged to accelerate the pace of development and stimulate economic growth.

Lastly, navigating geopolitical dynamics requires a pragmatic and balanced approach to safeguard the sovereignty and interests of both nations. Strengthening diplomatic engagement with neighboring countries and regional organizations can foster dialogue, confidence-building, and conflict resolution. A strategic partnership between Bangladesh and India based on mutual respect, trust, and shared values is crucial for promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.

In conclusion, implementing these policy recommendations can pave the way for a future characterized by deeper cooperation, mutual trust, and shared prosperity between Bangladesh and India. By addressing key challenges, seizing opportunities, and fostering closer ties, both nations can chart a course towards a more resilient and inclusive South Asia.

Conclusion

The relationship between Bangladesh and India stands at a pivotal juncture, characterized by a complex interplay of historical legacies, geopolitical dynamics, economic imperatives, and shared aspirations for regional stability and prosperity. Through an in-depth analysis, this research has uncovered key insights into the current state and potential future trajectory of this critical bilateral relationship.

Historically, Bangladesh-India relations have been marked by periods of tension and cooperation, shaped by factors ranging from territorial disputes to cultural affinities. However, recent years have witnessed a significant thaw in relations, driven by a shared recognition of the benefits of closer cooperation in diverse areas, including trade, security, and people-to-people contacts.

Economically, both countries have increasingly realized the potential for mutual benefit through enhanced trade and investment ties. Bilateral trade has been on an upward trajectory, supported by the implementation of various bilateral agreements aimed at reducing trade barriers and promoting economic integration. Moreover, initiatives such as the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor underscore the growing emphasis on regional connectivity and economic cooperation. Security cooperation has also emerged as a crucial pillar of the Bangladesh-India relationship, with both countries recognizing the importance of joint efforts in addressing common challenges such as terrorism, transnational crime, and border security issues. The signing of the Land Boundary Agreement in 2015 marked a significant milestone in this regard, demonstrating a shared commitment to resolving longstanding territorial disputes through diplomatic dialogue and mutual understanding.

Despite these positive developments, challenges remain, particularly in the realm of water sharing and climate change. Issues related to the sharing of rivers such as the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Teesta continue to strain the relationship, highlighting the need for a comprehensive and cooperative approach to water management. Additionally, the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels and extreme weather events, pose significant challenges for both countries, necessitating closer collaboration on adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Looking ahead, the future trajectory of Bangladesh-India relations holds immense promise, but also requires careful navigation of complex geopolitical dynamics and domestic considerations. Policymakers on both sides must remain committed to building upon the existing foundations of trust and cooperation, while also addressing outstanding issues through sustained diplomatic engagement and dialogue.

In conclusion, the future of Bangladesh-India relations is inherently intertwined with the broader aspirations for peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. By leveraging their shared history, cultural ties, and strategic interests, Bangladesh and India have the opportunity to chart a course towards deeper cooperation and mutual benefit, ultimately contributing to a more secure and prosperous South Asia.

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